

# Phidde village wants Surjeet as sarpanch

BALWANT GARG/TNS

PHIDDE (FEROZEPUR), JUNE 29

After spending over three decades in a Pakistan jail, the strong-willed Surjeet Singh is set to play an important role in his native Phidde village.

If in his youth Surjeet was appreciated for playing a mediator whenever there was a tiff between two groups in his village, the 69-year-old is now being seen as Phidde's new adjudicator. There is no doubt that residents have high expectations of him.

"Surjeet will be the next sarpanch of our village Phidde," announces Bishan Singh, an old friend. Other villagers, including several youths, gathered at Surjeet's house echo their support for Bishan Singh's proposal.

Sitting in the courtyard of his house, donning a saffron turban, his white beard flowing, Surjeet is quick at recalling the names of most of his relatives and friends who have come to meet him.

Known for having a large circle of friends during his youth and also while in prison, Surjeet says he befriended several fellow inmates at Kot Lakhpat Jail in Lahore. He says the total number of prisoners there is more than 4,000.

"Pakistani prisoners would often share with Indian prisoners the eatables brought for them by their relatives.

"I don't know about the general feeling in Pakistani towards Indians, but at Kot Lakhpat, no Pakistani harboured any ill-will towards an Indian prisoner. We all wanted ties between the two countries to improve for the betterment of both the countries," he says.

Surjeet says the mortal remains of Indian prisoners in Pakistan's jails are kept in safe custody in urns, covered with a white cloth.

"The thought of embracing Islam never struck my mind. I had converted my cell in the jail into a gurdwara where cigarette, 'pan masala' or any



**HOPING AGAINST HOPE:** Paramjit Kaur, daughter of Jugraj Singh who went missing in the 1971 India-Pakistan war, shows his picture to Surjeet Singh in the hope of getting news about him. Tribune photo: Pawan Sharma

other intoxicant was strictly banned. No jail inmate ever violated my wishes," he recalls. "Four days before I was released from jail, a Punjabi youth, Jatinder, was brought there from the Sheikhupura jail," he says. Asked why he had changed his name to Surjeet Singh from Makhan Singh, he says: "I did so to conceal my identity at the time of my arrest by Pakistan Rangers."

Carrying photographs of missing relatives, a number of families of Indian prisoners of war (PoW) missing in the 1971 India-Pakistan war, today called on Surjeet, seeking to know if he had any information about them.

Most of them went back disappointed.

One such family was that of BSF jawan Jugraj Singh of Jeeda village in Bathinda district. His 32-year-old daughter Paramjit Kaur and 35-year-old son Jasswinder Singh met Surjeet at Phidde village and enquired about their father.

Much to their disappointment, Surjeet told them that he had never met Jugraj while in Pakistan.

## No news of Surjeet's namesake

BALWANT GARG/TNS

FARIDKOT, JUNE 29

There is another Surjeet Singh of Faridkot whose family has been waiting for his return from Pakistan for 41 years. His family claims Surjeet, a BSF jawan who went missing during the 1971 war, too is lodged at Pakistan's Kot Lakhpat Jail.

Amrik Singh, son of the missing jawan, is desperate to meet Surjeet Singh to inquire whether he had ever met his father in the jail.

Surjeet says he never got a chance to meet his namesake. "But he may be lodged at Kot Lakhpat Jail which is quite big." In April, Amrik Singh had sought Pakistan human rights activist Ansar Burney's help in tracing his father. "Burney had assured us of all help. Hence, when we got news that Pakistan had decided to release Surjeet Singh, we got hopeful," he said.

## RAW agent claim false: Home Secy

TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, JUNE 29

A day after Surjeet Singh claimed he had been working as a RAW agent before he was arrested by Pakistan, Union Home Secretary RK Singh today clarified that the country had no spies in the neighbouring nation.

Surjeet had said yesterday that he was a spy and had blamed the Indian authorities for having ignored him after his arrest in Pakistan 30 years ago. Released yesterday, he entered India through the Attari-Wagah land route.

Responding to media queries on Surjeet's claims of being a RAW agent and having met several top leaders in Pakistan, Singh said: "We do not agree with what he claims... We are not into spying... All such claims are being done to seek self-importance."

## Gill: Frame policy on undercover agents

TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, JUNE 29

Expressing anguish over Surjeet Singh's fate who had to spend three decades in a Pakistani jail, Punjab MP Manohar Singh Gill has said there was a need to frame a policy on all those who chose to work as undercover agents for different intelligence agencies but were caught.

"A man drafted by an agency is caught and spends years in jail in that country. Having spent his youth in jail, he comes home in old age to find his siblings either dead or aged, his children becoming adults... What is our policy towards such people", Dr Gill asked.

The former Union Minister hoped that the Chief Justice of Pakistan would look into the cases of Indian prisoners who continued to languish in jails even after having served their sentence.

The judicial system should also ensure that such persons were awarded compensation. "Surjeet's wife had to do odd jobs to keep the family going and the agencies responsible virtually abandoned the family. Should not these people be paid or looked after," he asked.

Dr Gill said while countries did engage in counter-intelligence operations, it was time that all civilised countries exchanged such agents just as the US and Russia had done.

The Punjab MP said he planned to raise the issue in Parliament and seek an answer from the Government on the matter.